



**Liz Gustafson, MSW**  
State Director  
Pro-Choice Connecticut  
**Testimony for Public Hearing**  
Public Health Committee  
**February 22, 2023**

Dear Senator Anwar, Representative McCarthy Vahey, and esteemed members of the Public Health Committee, my name is Liz Gustafson, and I am the State Director of Pro-Choice Connecticut. **Thank you for accepting this testimony in support of S.B. 957 An Act Concerning the Oversight of Health Care In Correctional Institutions by the Department of Public Health.**

Connecticut has historically been a leader in the fight to protect and expand reproductive freedom, which includes ensuring everyone, including people incarcerated in our state's prisons, are able to exercise their bodily autonomy and access the full range of healthcare services with safety, support, and dignity. Last year the Public Health Committee sought to set forth actions to address these issues with SB 448, which became Public Act 22-133<sup>1</sup>, and today in solidarity with the Regulate DOC Healthcare CT Coalition we respectfully ask the committee to follow through on this effort, and implement regulation and oversight of the Department of Corrections healthcare system.

Currently, Connecticut is the only state in which the Department of Corrections (DOC) oversees and operates its own healthcare system, which has led to subpar quality of care for incarcerated individuals and poor health outcomes for returning citizens. Additionally, DOC has failed to maintain an adequate number of medical staff to ensure that people get quality, individualized care. In March 2019, the DOC reported a ratio of one nurse on staff for every 43 prisoners and one doctor on staff for every 579 prisoners according to the Office of Fiscal Analysis<sup>2</sup>. Access to healthcare for incarcerated people is a constitutional right— and ensuring access to humane, quality, healthcare is integral to the fight for reproductive freedom, racial, and gender justice.

Mass incarceration disproportionately harms Black and Brown communities, as six Connecticut cities are home to more than half of the state's incarcerated population, but make up only 17 percent of the state's total population<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, the number of incarcerated women of reproductive age, particularly women of color, continues to increase across the country<sup>4</sup>. Connecticut has paid out millions of dollars in lawsuits related to medical negligence within the DOC, including the failure to provide safe pregnancy and birthing care to incarcerated women at York Correctional Facility- but the significant cost is the immediate harm and long term impact this has on individuals, their families and communities of returning citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2022/ACT/PA/PDF/2022PA-00133-R00SB-00448-PA.PDF>

<sup>2</sup> *Appropriations Subcommittee Work Session 03/26/2019*, CONN. DEP'T CORRECTIONS (Mar. 26, 2019), available at <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/6178958/DOC-appropriations-subcommittee-03-26-19.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Emily Widra, et al., *Where People in Prison Come From: The Geography of Mass Incarceration in Connecticut*, PRISON POL'Y INITIATIVE (Oct. 2022), <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/origin/ct/2020/report.html>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/11/Incarcerated-Women-and-Girls.pdf>

**Senate Bill 957 takes an important step forward towards improving health care for incarcerated individuals, but the bill could be strengthened with the inclusion of the following:**

- Establish a regulating body and oversight process for the Department of Corrections healthcare system through the Department of Public Health in combination with the standards and accreditation provided by the National Commission on Correctional Healthcare<sup>5</sup>.
- Creation of a Correctional Health Review Board that would receive reports on health outcomes for incarcerated individuals and returning citizens, healthcare staffing reports, health related incident reports, and provide policy and procedure recommendations.
  - The Correctional Health Review Board membership must be composed of healthcare experts and community stakeholders, including but not limited to; OBGYNs, infectious disease specialists, endocrinologists, dentists, mental health and substance abuse practitioners, as well as returning citizens and justice-impacted people.

The widespread and systemic harm caused by the carceral system, and the lived experiences shared by justice-impacted people, their families, and loved ones, underscores the urgent need for this committee and the Connecticut General Assembly to act. Healthcare is a fundamental human right, and S.B. 957 is a critical step towards prevention of further negligence and harm experienced by people who are incarcerated in Connecticut's prisons. Pro-Choice Connecticut strongly urges this Committee to support S.B. 957, and consider our additional recommendations to improve outcomes for incarcerated individuals, DOC health care workers, and returning citizens.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Liz Gustafson  
State Director  
Pro-Choice Connecticut

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ncchc.org/about-us/>